

PROGRAMA C

LAURA HUERTAS MILLÁN

Ethnographic Fiction

Laura Huertas Millán, *La librería (still)*, 2016



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Curator: Manuela Moscoso

April-June 2016

Gallery C

FOUR QUESTIONS TO LAURA HUERTAS MILLÁN

Manuela Moscoso: Laura, I would like to start with your background: clearly, you have a deep interest for cinematography, and in fact you are currently enrolled in a graduate program that focuses on the moving image. Can you tell us about your studies and how you delved into the field of cinema in your artistic research?

Laura Huertas Millán: I started studying liberal arts in Bordeaux. Then I studied at the *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, where I realized that my processes always tended towards story telling and research, a need to articulate and speculate about political topics, from and within images. Then, at Le Fresnoy (a French school of art and cinema) I was able to develop two short films through which I discovered my passion for the moving image, but also my fascination with film as a cultural space. This led me to undertake a PhD in artistic practice in 2012 on “ethnographic fiction”, a paradoxical postulate that I have been working on since the beginning in the creation of my films.

MM: *La libertad* [Freedom] is thus one of the results of this research. Before, however, I think it is important to expand on how and when cinema started becoming an ethnographic tool.

LHM: When you consider the very origins of cinema –the Lumière brothers, standing there, holding their first movie camera, filming factory workers as they leave their own factory in Lyon, France (*Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon*, 1895)–, you could say that ethnography and cinema have always been intrinsically intertwined. This gesture on behalf of the Lumière brothers, simple, at first sight, is loaded with anthropological content: it speaks of class relations, the rise of industrialization, daily rituals, the economy of a movie...

However, Robert Flaherty (1884-1951) is said to have been the first filmmaker-ethnographer; but at the same time, his work has been acknowledged to tend towards fiction (several sequences in his film *Nanook Of The North*, 1922, considered by many to be the first documentary film in history, were actually staged). Jean Rouch

(1917-1924), another forefather of visual anthropology, and one of the most significant influences in my work, echoes Flaherty's oeuvre by qualifying his own work as "ethno-fiction". Rouch subverts the supposedly neutral and objective logic of ethnography, including the modernist notion of self-reflectiveness in an anthropologist's work, thus creating, according to his own words, a shared anthropology between the subject who is filming and the person being filmed. Hence, one may say that ethnographers have incorporated cinema in the construction and development of their discipline, although they did not all have Rouch's self-analytical rigor.

On the other hand, ethnography has also been a tool for cinema. Very early on after its invention, a series of film formats arose which were connected to ethnographic observation. Such is the case of the reels of explorers who made contact with ethnic groups previously unknown to the Western world, for example. Or fiction auteur films that subvert ethnographic film codes, using its archetypes to comment on and criticize its iconography: Luis Buñuel's *Land Without Bread* [*Las Hurdes, tierra sin pan*] (1932), or more recently, *Embrace of the Serpent* [*El abrazo de la serpiente*] (Ciro Guerra, 2015). All of these examples of partnerships between ethnography and cinema trace a complex cartography of relationships where the boundaries (nowadays considered obsolete) between documentary film and fiction are called into question.

MM: So, historically, ethnographic filmmaking has been used as an anthropological research tool for the analysis, observation, or description of generally non-Western cultural realities, where the "Other" was recurrently reduced to an image without context. In what way does your work converse with this history and challenge the problems set forth by this type of filmmaking?

LHM: An encounter I had with a book in an anthropology museum in Chile awoke my interest for ethnography. This book portrayed a *Mapuche* indigenous group who traveled to the Paris Winter Gardens with one of the human zoos that took place during the colonial exhibitions that were carried out in the early 20th century in Europe. These unacceptable images, influenced by a racist and objectivizing perspective, fruit of the genocide committed against European colonies' native tribes, marked me profoundly. I then became interested in the representations of the Tropical made by Europeans, both in colonial times and today, and I was able to perceive a series of "twiches" in their mise-en-scène: the camera, in a slight high angle, the subjects represented frontally, looking into the camera, the folkloric dresses, the picturesque architectural replicas, the falsely endearing presence of children.

When I started working with ethnographic iconography, I did it with the intent of rebelling against its effects on many realities of the world. Thus, between 2009 and 2012, I made a series of films on the notion of exoticism that both exposed and problematized the origins of ethnography in colonialism. As of 2013, I began a research on "ethnographic fiction" which I developed during my doctorate, whose objective was twofold: on one hand, I sought to continue the work of several modern and contemporary thinkers who have deconstructed and decolonialized ethnography

and the way history has been written; on the other hand, I wanted to dialogue with the self-reflexive work of ethnography, which questions the old categories of exclusive "knowledge" with a Western perspective and knowledge, in order to focus on exploring the construction of this relationship with the "Other". Currently, I'm very much interested by "ethnographic surrealism" and the connections between ethnography and psychoanalysis, exploring the unconscious, obscure, violent part that resides in the desire for the exotic, in the will to travel in order to disappear or to become someone else.

MM: Now let's talk about *La libertad* [Freedom]. How did this project come about and which aspect of ethnographic cinema were you exploring with this project?

LHM: This project was the result of a residency I did in Puebla and Oaxaca. With the support of Arquetopia and Raymundo Fraga, I was able to meet the Navarro family, a family of artisans and weavers of *Zapoteca* origins who live in Santo Tomás Jalieza, and with whom I was able to explore how traditional weaving has created an archive parallel to the official history of colonization, miscegenation, and independence. In this very process, I also learned to weave with Master Eufrocina Vásquez López using a backstrap loom. Additionally, I was able to interview the Oaxaca Textile Museum staff, and to speak with textile collectors in order to gain a better understanding of local artisanal dynamics.

Simultaneously, I filmed the daily process of weaving at the Navarro family home. By getting the chance to knit a close bond with them, I was able to perceive the constellation that orbits around the loom, the ecology and ethics that are built as you work. I was amazed by the omnipresence of the word "freedom" in their conversations, and the Navarro's struggle to build their existence in search for a social and economic autonomy. *La libertad* is the result of a dialogue with the Navarros, and I try to reflect together with them upon the possibilities of this concept. However, the film is proposed as an ethnographic fiction, given that all scenes, even if captured during daily life moments, are considered to be staged; both they and I were participating in a performative situation generated by the filming, and our awareness of putting up a representation.

The exhibition *Ethnographic Fiction* extends to the MAMM Theater, with a performance, two short-film programs, and one feature film program curated by the artist. Every film featured in the theater is an echo of Huertas Millán's own work, screened in Gallery C, and the ideas that she has tackled in her oeuvre: the relationship between cinema and ethnography, the documentary and fiction binomial, the relationship between colonialism and anthropology, and finally, the moving image as augmented reality.

PERFORMANCE

Laura Huertas Millán: *Museo caníbal* [Cannibal Museum]
THURSDAY, APRIL 21st, 7 p.m. Free Admission

SHORT FILMS PROGRAMME I – ANTROPOFAGIA [ANTHROPOPHAGY] / 81 min.

Víjete en tierra otrora contada. Dir. Laura Huertas Millán / 2012/ 23 min.
Where to Sit at the Dinner Table. Dir. Pedro Neves Márquez / 2013/ 28 min.
Ocidente. Dir. Ana Vaz / 2014 / 15 min.

Toré. Dir. João Vieira Torres y Tanawi Xucuru Kariri / 2014 / 15 min.

FRIDAY, APRIL 22nd, 7 p.m. With the presence of the artist . Free Admission

MONDAY, JULY 4th, 5 p.m.

SHORT FILMS PROGRAMME II – RUINAS Y HETEROTOPÍAS [RUINS AND HETEROTOPIAS] / 77 min.

Deep Sleep. Dir. Basma Al Sharif / 2014 / 12 min.

Sans Titre. Dir. Neil Beloufa / 2012 / 15 min.

Aequador. Dir. Laura Huertas Millán / 2013 / 19 min.

Pódworka. Dir. Sharon Lockart / 2009 / 31 min.

SATURDAY APRIL 23rd, 7:10 p.m. With the presence of the artist . Free Admission

FRIDAY JULY 1st, 7 p.m.

FEATURE FILMS

Film tickets at MAMM's main entrance

Leviathan. Dir. Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Véréna Paravel / 2012 /
France-United Kingdom-USA / 87 min.

THURSDAY, APRIL 28th, 5 p.m. / SUNDAY, MAY 8th, 7 p.m.

Manakamana. Dir. Stephanie Spray, Pacho Velez / 2013 /
Nepal-USA / 112 min.

FRIDAY, APRIL 29th, 9:30 p.m. / THURSDAY, MAY 12th, 5 p.m.

Embrace of the Serpent [*El abrazo de la serpiente*]. Dir. Ciro Guerra/ 2015/
Colombia-Venezuela-Argentina/ 125 min.

THURSDAY, MAY 5th, 7 p.m.

Jaguar. Dir. Jean Rouch / 1954 / France / 110 min.

THURSDAY, MAY 19th, 7 p.m. / SATURDAY, MAY 28th, 7 p.m.

Perfumed Nightmare. Dir. Kidlat Tahimik / 1977 / Philippines / 93 min.

FRIDAY, JUNE 10th, 7 p.m. / THURSDAY, JUNE 16th, 9 p.m.

Cemetery of Splendour. Dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul / 2015 /
Thailand / 122 min.

SATURDAY, JUNE 18th, 5 p.m. / THURSDAY, JUNE 23rd, 7 p.m.

PROGRAMA C aims at strengthening MAMM's commitment to contemporary artistic creation through a series of curatorial research projects, follow-up processes, and exhibitions presented in the Museum's Gallery C. This initiative attempts to promote and stimulate the production of emerging Colombian artists while providing a space for the dissemination and public enjoyment of contemporary art practices. **PROGRAMA C** links the Museum and Medellín with alternative and innovative artists in Colombia and around the world.

LAURA HUERTAS MILLÁN is a Colombian artist and filmmaker. She studied at the Paris *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts*, and has a master's degree from Le Fresnoy *Studio National des Arts Contemporains* in France. She is currently preparing a doctorate in artistic practices at the Paris *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts* and the *École Normale Supérieure Rue d'Ulm*, conducting a research on cinema and ethnography between Paris and Harvard University, where she has been a member of the Sensory Ethnography Lab and a grant recipient from the Film Study Center. Her work has been exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, USA; Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France; MAMBO, Bogotá, Colombia; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany; CCCB, Barcelona, Spain; AwZ, Vienna, Austria; Laboral, Gijón, Spain; Villa Arson, France; the Château de Annecy Museum, France; Metales Pesados, Chile; Lugar a dudas, Colombia; Saison Video, France. Huertas Millán has participated in festivals such as FIDMarseille, Videobrasil, FICUNAM, *Bienal de la Imagen en Movimiento* and Vila do Conde.

MANUELA MOSCOSO is Curator at the Museo Rufino Tamayo in Mexico City. Simultaneously, Moscoso is a member of Zarigüeya at Casa del Alabado Pre-Columbian Art Museum (Ecuador), a project that explores the bonds between pre-Columbian and temporary practices, with artists such as Asier Mendizabal and Osías Yanov. She was Adjunct Curator of the 12th Cuenca Biennial 2014, Ecuador, and she has curated exhibitions in countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Spain, Norway, Belgium, and the United States, among others. Moscoso holds a master's degree from the Bard College Center for Curatorial Studies.

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